

And It All Leads Back to You

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And It All Leads Back to You

by [ellis \(ellabellachicketychella\)](#).

Summary

The story of Thomas Underscore, before he was Thomas Underscore, and how Business Bay both created him and ruined him, through the eyes of the leader of Business Bay, Deo.

Deo is eighteen when he becomes the leader of Business Bay.

He's eighteen when he hears about a kid who blew up his house—

And he's been nineteen for a few minutes when he helps the kid fake his death, finds him a new birth certificate and decides that he will always be protected by Business Bay.

or, we find out why Tommy's morals are so fucked, why he needs buckets of therapy, and why he's like *that*.

Notes

Warnings: violence, minor character death, bodies, guns, blood (it's a rather violent fic as Deo is the leader of a violent gang), gangs, implied/referenced child abuse

HI FRIENDS!!!! Welcome to the biggest snippet of Tommy's backstory we will get until... well he tells Wilbur about it in the main fic, this is through the eyes of Deo! It is also the first (AND ONLY (well that might change)) snippet we see of the end of TINAAOS, that's right bitches. We get like 2 clues about the end of TINAAOS, fucking enjoy!

I apologise for the inaccurate characterisation, Wisp's is based on the fact that on SMP Earth he kinda... ditches Business Bay to join the Antarctic Empire, I made Deo semi-responsible because it made sense, and I had no clue what to do with Luke and Bitzel so they're just kinda there

Theorists, uh... I will be honest there isn't a lot to like dissect here that you haven't already found in the main fic, but there's still some pieces in here.

I hope you enjoy the tragedy that is Business Bay, because I sure as fuck do!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Deo is eighteen when he becomes the leader of Business Bay.

His dad dies in a shootout and because Deo was second in charge he's now the leader. He doesn't get to go to his father's funeral because there are things to be done, loose ends to tie up and no time to mourn.

He was supposed to go to university— sure, he'd be a gang leader when his father eventually died but he didn't think it would be this soon.

He's eighteen when he hears about a kid who blew up his house—

And he's been nineteen for a few minutes when he helps the kid fake his death, finds him a new birth certificate and decides that he will always be protected by Business Bay.

So he's nineteen when Business Bay stops selling, it's not a popular decision but Deo knows it's worth it.

When he apologises to the kid, Tom, he goes by Tommy now. And he means it, he knows that has to count for something with the sparkle in his eye.

"As long as Business Bay stands, we will protect you— in whatever way you need," Deo promises.

He's been nineteen for three days.

The kid keeps his distance for a long time, still within the organisation but never talking to the people taking him in.

Deo never blames him.

They're essentially the reason his parents died.

So Tommy is allowed to be angry. And he's allowed to stay angry.

The anger changes into something softer. Deo's not sure when it happened and he never asks Tommy.

He thinks a couple of things helped.

One day it was early in the morning, Deo was sitting in the building and Tommy was sitting on the floor, playing with a truck absentmindedly.

Deo was... well almost solely in charge of Tommy. He's the person who would find him a house to stay in, members of Business Bay who would take him in for a couple of days to a month

He felt a bit like a foster worker.

Apart from the fact, there's a gun under his desk and another weapon strapped to the bottom of his chair.

And the windows are bullet proof...

It's quiet, Tommy doesn't speak much because he never speaks a lot. He's a calm kid, everyone who houses him comments on how lovely he is.

Some of them, the ones who have siblings or children, pause and say that it's worrying. That if Tommy could he'd disappear into himself.

Deo doesn't know how to fix this.

So selfishly, he doesn't.

"Does anyone want to keep me?" Tommy asks and Deo looks up.

"Pardon, buddy?"

"I—" Tommy shrugs and looks down at his toy truck. "No one wants to keep me."

"That's not true," Deo says because he knows it's untrue. "It's not safe to keep you in one place."

Tommy nods and looks down at his truck.

He falls silent again and Deo wants Tommy to talk, he wants him to talk forever if he wants. The silence is worrying, Tommy is worrying and Deo cares so much about this kid—

Huh.

"You can speak, y'know," Deo says because it's driving him a little bit mad.

"I don't want you to be mad at me."

Huh?

"Huh?"

"Well, people get angry when I talk. And— I don't want you to be mad at me, you're nice to me."

"Has anyone... from Business Bay been mean to you, Tommy?"

He shakes his head. "But Ma and Pa didn't like it when I talked too much... I was lucky I had baby teeth."

Deo stares at him with horror. "They hit you?"

"Yeah?" Tommy says slowly, like he's never considered another alternative. "How else do parents make their kids quiet when they're being annoying?"

Deo's stomach lurches dangerously and he stands up from his seat. "I'm not mad at you— I just— need a moment, I'll get someone in here, I'll— I'll be back."

And he basically runs out of the room and finds his way to the closest bathroom. There he grabs onto the sides of the sink and stares at himself in the mirror.

He feels ill.

And the adoption papers may as well have been signed because there was no way Deo wasn't looking after this kid.

It may have been guilt, or something else. But it was now his life.

Well...

Luke and Bitzel weren't really fans if Deo was completely honest.

"No." That is what Bitzel said, really pointedly. "Deo we have more guns than... children's toys. We have people constantly going in and out, dangerous people, we can not have a kid here."

"You haven't seen him," Deo paces up and down. "He just needs to be loved. Well, not just—love doesn't fix trauma, but he needs stability. The first six years of his life have had none of that and he needs that and if I'm shipping him off to every other house—"

"Put him in foster care," Luke says.

Deo pauses. "I was in foster care—"

"Yeah?" Luke says, "And?"

"That's not stable, at all. You need to be adopted. And no one with good intentions is gonna adopt a kid with powers like his—"

"Do you?" Luke asks absent-mindedly, "Have good intentions?"

Deo looks at him and manages a nod, "I— I don't care if he's powered or not. I want to see him happy—"

"Look," Bitzel says with a sigh. "Just adopt a cat if you have this whole guilt thing."

"Just meet him," Deo pleads, "Please?"

Luke sighs, but that's an agreement.

And Deo knows, he just knows he's won this one.

He's right.

Luke takes one look at Tommy holding a bear and a pillow, and looking at him with wide blue eyes for him to give in.

Bitzel—to his credit holds out for a whole minute.

"Hello," Tommy says and holds out his hand for Bitzel to shake. "Are you Mr Deo's friends?"

Their minds are made up pretty quickly after that.

And so Tommy moves in.

They're not really sure... what to get a small child, none of them were really kids. So they kinda... get everything.

They get everything—they get stuffed animals and toy trucks and barbies because *"maybe he likes barbies!"* Luke argues which is a solid argument.

They get a soccer ball and they get an iPad and they get a million posters from TV shows they've never heard of.

The room is bright, with a single bed with an eye-sore of a doona that Bitzel bought. It has a pillow shaped like an avocado and it is maybe the ugliest room Deo's ever seen.

The walls themselves are just white, he's not letting them paint them. They do have a massive light-blue cloud-shaped rug, however, which is very fluff and nice.

Along the wall, next to the door is a large bookshelf, which has an actual storage cupboard in it. Part of it is for all the board games and stuffed animals, and part of it is for clothes.

Bitzel is in charge of clothes—

There's a reason Tommy never develops a sense of fashion beyond hoodies.

Deo is in charge of child-proofing the house because they have way too many weapons laying about for a child to be here.

There are knives hidden under couch cushions and guns stuffed in cabinets. There are weapons everywhere... which is fine, they just need to be in places Tommy can't reach.

They need their guns and weapons around, in case someone attacks. But now they need to put them on top of cabinets or lock them somewhere.

So that's his job.

It's a bit dull.

It's a terrible amount of just moving shit around and buying like ten combination locks.

It has to be done though, and Deo does it, he knows that no one else will and so he's the one left doing it.

Wisp falls into their life just before Tommy, or around the same time. Deo can't remember.

He knows Tommy wasn't in the house when they brought Wisp to the headquarters, which was also their house. But the house had been childproofed.

Wisp laughs about all the locks on the cabinets for guns and Deo shuts that down.

He's a Pandora's person, he claims he broke out of there but everyone doubts it. He certainly has the scars to prove it, mottled, ugly scars that laced his arms and hands.

The worst ones were the ones around his wrists.

Power suppressants and handcuffs in one, they had rubbed away a layer of skin— more than one, and it had left a mess of a scar in its wake.

Deo thinks Wisp ends up with them because all cons end up where they are. They're not sure how to not be that. They're not sure how to be upstanding when they're not given a reason to be upstanding.

Wisp killed his father.

His father was allegedly an important man, with lots of money and even more important allies.

His father was abusive.

Wisp thought he was going to die.

His powers lashed out before he did.

Wisp killed his father and was left with the body and blood dripping from his nose.

Wisp never tells, or shows them what his powers are.

Deo's never curious.

"My sister fuckin' sold me off to a gang?" Wisp says for the fifth time. "What in the One Direction fanfiction—"

Deo just sighs. "She didn't sell you off to anyone. You can leave. We owe her a favour and she wants us to give you a place to stay."

Wisp looks at him for a long moment.

The night Wisp sleeps there for the first night, it's surprisingly quiet.

Then Deo goes out the next morning and Wisp is asleep on the kitchen tile.

He's so bewildered he just stares for a moment before prodding the blanketed mess on the ground with his foot.

The aforementioned blanketed mess makes a swat at Deo and a tired grumble.

"Why are you on the floor?" Deo mutters, wishing he could stamp out the coldness in his voice.

"Mattress is too soft," Wisp mutters, he doesn't look ashamed, Wisp was always too good, or too tired, for shame. "Didn't have a fuckin' bed in Pandora's."

"You didn't... have a bed?" Deo whispers.

"Ha. Pandora's is where the scum of the scum go," Wisp laughs. "You think they give a shit? Most people in there deserve it, I probably did."

"You didn't," Deo says. "You were sixteen."

Wisp just looks at him for a long moment. "At least the heroes didn't get me," Deo mutters, "Bunch of wankers, I'll take my chances in Pandora's."

Deo rolls his eyes. "Stop concerning yourself with heroes. They'll never have shit to do with us."

"Hope so," Wisp says. "Pandora's is—" he shudders. "Awful."

"What's it like?" Deo asks.

Wisp screws up his nose. "Depends. Ran into trouble early on with some people I shouldn't have run into trouble with. The guards had it against me because I killed the man who was going to up their pay and instead put some '*stupid liberal commie*' in charge."

Deo stares at him.

"They— really like their isolation cells. Sensory deprivation shit, power experiments— they do whatever they fucking want." Wisp adds with a shudder. "Drug you, beat you up— it's... not good."

Deo can't take his eyes off of Wisp, still sitting on the floor with a casual look in his eyes.

"Don't be weird," Wisp says. "You kill people."

"Yeah—" Deo says slowly. "And?"

"You can't exactly act sad about a lack of morals."

"You were a kid," Deo says slowly.

Wisp looks at him for a long moment, something angry on his face, "You're younger than me, save the sobbing, you're not exactly where you're supposed to be at your age, Deo— so don't try that bullshit on me."

"You were sixteen," Deo says again.

Wisp doesn't say anything, but his frown strengthens and he rolls back over. Of course, he's on the floor, so it doesn't have quite the same level of drama as he rolls over. Glaring at the wall.

Deo shakes his head and leaves the room.

Tommy's arrival comes shortly after this, and Deo remembers it quite clearly. Wisp no longer slept on the kitchen floor and instead slept on the carpeted floor of his bedroom, it wasn't a huge fucking jump but it was a jump.

Deo double-checks all the locks and the childproofing measures, he puts all of their work stuff in the basement and makes sure that Luke does not have blood on the shirt he wears and he makes sure that Bitzel doesn't actually burn down the kitchen.

Put a bunch of— essentially teenage boys in an apartment with an odd child and things will not go well.

Tommy arrives quietly, Deo thanks the family that dropped him off and takes note of how Tommy actually has bags, suitcases and important things— not the trash bags that Deo got used to lugging around while he was in the system.

Good.

Tommy deserved to be part of a family, part of a community, part of something.

“Hi!” Tommy says brightly, he smiles and Deo notices he's missing one of his front teeth— wait does he have to do Tooth Fairy shit then— Deo doesn't know how to do Tooth Fairy shit. Wait, fuck they have to do Christmas and Easter because Tommy is a literal child now—

“Hello!” Deo says brightly.

Tommy grins.

Wisp walks out of his room, generally bringing the brooding air that follows someone when they've been in Pandora's for five years. He looks at Tommy by the front door and his entire face screws up.

“What the fuck is that?”

“That is a child,” Bitzel deadpans.

“Who the fuck are you?” Wisp snaps.

Tommy flinches so hard it looks painful.

Deo might actually rip Wisp limb from limb.

“Uh—” Tommy looks down at the floor, “I’m— I’m uh— I’m Tommy, Mister, Mr Deo said I could stay with— stay with you guys? I think that’s still okay.”

“Yes, Tommy,” Deo shoots Wisp a look. “It’s one hundred percent okay. This is Wisp, he— is recovering with us.”

“Recovering?” Wisp exclaims, “What am I recovering from—”

“He was in a mean place,” Luke says, and even then Luke was always the best at calming down Tommy in a way that made sense, and censored. And yeah, Tommy had probably seen and heard worse, but he hadn’t seen or heard worse from them, and Deo had full intentions to keep it that way.

Luke squats so he stands in front of Tommy.

They have the same shade of blond hair.

Deo suppresses his fond smile at that.

Luke glances over his shoulder and Deo does his best to give a confirming nod. “Wisp was in a very mean place, and— it still affects him sometimes, he gets scared sometimes.”

“Luke,” Wisp says, “I am going to—”

“And sometimes he remembers things he doesn’t want to,” Luke continues softly, “So he’s trying to stop remembering the mean things, but that’s hard, because sometimes his brain tells him he’s still there.”

Tommy tilts his head at Luke, then looks at Wisp. “Like me and Ma and Pa.”

Deo has never seen Luke as close to crying as he looks at that moment.

“Seems so, buddy,” Luke says, his voice thick with something. He tries to shake it off but.... There’s never really any recovering from when Tommy says something heartbreaking, something they will learn about more and more.

Tommy nods and looks at Wisp.

He walks over to him, with the determination that only a child can hold in their eyes.

Stopping in front of Wisp he puts his hands on his hips, Wisp rolls his eyes and crouches down so they’re at the same level.

Tommy grabs either side of Wisp’s face with his tiny child hands and Wisp just looks incredibly bored.

“Mr Wisp,” Tommy says, and *shit* he sounds so young. He *is* so young. “You can’t be lettin’ the brain demons get you.”

“Huh?”

“The brain demons!” Tommy says as if that makes any sense at all. “When you think of the mean things, the brain demons have gotten you.”

“Kid, I think that’s just called severe trauma—”

Tommy shakes his head, “I dunno what that is, but I do know. That the brain demons are being mean to you. So you gotta ignore them!”

“What?” Wisp’s voice is strained, maybe the most emotion Deo’s heard in his voice so far. “What do you mean— huh?”

“Just don’t think of the bad things!” Tommy says, “Or else when things get bad again then you gotta think of two bad things! I don’t wanna think of two bad things, so you ignore the brain demons.”

Wisp looks at Deo, it appears he wants help.

Deo... has no idea to help.

A seven-year-old boy is basically telling a grown man to just... repress the trauma, and the way he’s speaking about it makes Deo want to throw up into the nearest bucket or something. Because he’s so young and so innocent sounding, and he’s been through hell and back again and Deo wants to save this kid from the world.

This kid is too kind for the world.

Deo looks at Tommy and something in his heart breaks.

He's just a kid.

“Uh...” Wisp says, “Have you seen your room yet?” He asks and Tommy's eyes darken a little.

“No.”

“Come on Tommy,” Luke says gently, “Don't you wanna see your bedroom? You have trucks.”

“And barbies,” Bitzel adds, “And books and— you also have this creepy dog thing...”

Tommy nods slowly, before looking up at Luke, he grabs Luke's hand and lets himself get lead away to his bedroom.

Wisp immediately turns to Deo, “What the fuck is up with that kid—”

“He was abused,” Deo hisses, looking over his shoulder. “Badly, from all I've been told and all I know. He's... odd, and he apparently has very powerful enhancements—”

“That's why you're keeping him here,” Wisp hisses, “You're gonna fucking— use him like a ___”

Then Wisp jumps and they both whack against the floor, pain bursts through the back of Deo's head and for a moment the world spins and Deo can't think of anything. What he should be doing is grabbing his gun or starting to scream, what he actually does is watch idly as Wisp points a gun at his forehead.

“Huh?” Deo says.

“If you,” Wisp snarls, “Use that kid as any sort of weapon—”

“What?” Deo rasps out, “The fuck do you mean?”

“He’s powerful,” Wisp pushes the gun against Deo’s forehead more. “If you even *think* of using that kid as a weapon I will not hesitate to—”

“I’m not going to,” Deo keeps his voice surprisingly level. “Alright? I don’t want to freak out Tommy right now, so I don’t need him seeing you pointing a gun at me. Now get up, and we’re going to show Tommy around the house. Okay?”

Wisp hesitates for a few seconds before he does get up.

He offers a hand up to Deo.

Deo takes it.

Tommy has a shell.

That is clear as day to anyone with eyes, he seems to know what he’s saying and why he’s saying it. He’s reserved, he acts like he wants to sink into the background and if Deo wasn’t so trained at seeing people in the background then maybe he’d miss Tommy.

The few glimpses of *Tommy* that Deo has gotten to see are rare.

Normally when he thinks he's alone, telling himself a story with his trucks or his barbies, or hitting something against the floor. Something that he actually does— quite a bit now that Deo thinks about it.

Deo... should probably ask someone qualified about that.

But Tommy is bright, it's the only way Deo can describe him.

He has a big personality, he is a vibrant person— Deo already knows this from the glimpses of Tommy, the times he laughs too hard before looking at the closest adult like they're gonna hit him.

“Hi,” Deo says one afternoon.

He's done with the various tasks that happen when you're the leader of a gang. Mostly like... Deo doesn't even know, it's not like murder is on the daily agenda. It's more organising, if he ever has to go to a parent-teacher interview for Tommy he'll say he works in HR, it's basically the same thing.

Tommy looks up from his seemingly intense games of trucks. “Hi.” He says his voice seems smaller than usual.

“Can I play trucks with you?” Deo asks and Tommy blinks at him. “If you want to of course.”

“You want to play trucks?” Tommy asks.

“Yeah,” Deo sits down on the floor, crossing his legs and looking at Tommy, Tommy watches him carefully. “Again if you don't want me to that's okay.”

“No, no—” Tommy’s voice is a little bit desperate, despite him trying to hide it. He’s only a kid, kids aren’t really known for being great liars. “You can play trucks, we’re racing them from that wall,” he points at the left wall. “To the wall,” he points at the wall to the right.

Okay, they’re racing across a room.

Tommy hands Deo a truck, and he’s beaming so bright it looks painful.

“Okay!” Tommy says, “Come on Mr Deo—”

“Just Deo, kid,” Deo says gently, “I’m not that old.”

Tommy looks at him for a moment, a confused, childish expression on his face. This makes sense because Tommy is confused and also a child. “No, I think you’re old,” he says, then slaps his hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean it I was—”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Deo has no idea how to comfort a kid but he’s going to do his fucking best, “It’s okay, you’re allowed to call me old as much as you like.”

Later he will regret that statement.

Not really... but he will say he will.

But at the moment he doesn’t care, and just wants Tommy to feel better. “It’s funny,” Deo continues, “Wisp will find it hilarious.”

Tommy nods seriously.

Shit.

Okay.

“Trucks?” Deo says, holding up his own truck.

And so him and Tommy line up against the wall, on their stomachs because Tommy said they have to be like worms— and Deo isn’t going to question this six-year-old because Deo thinks Tommy would win in a fight out of spite.

“Your feet aren’t against the wall!” Tommy frowns, “Feet against the wall.”

Deo puts his feet against the wall.

He doesn’t point out that Tommy is half a metre in front of him, he is small and also tiny and Deo doesn’t care that much about winning the game of trucks. He wants to make sure that Tommy has fun, and it seems like he’s doing that rather successfully.

“Ready?”

“Yup!”

“Set?”

Deo laughs, just a small thing, “Yup.”

And Tommy starts moving without saying go.

This makes Deo laugh before he starts slugging along the floor. Pulling himself with only his arms as Tommy scrambles like a weird-looking snake that also has arms and legs and is rather confused about it.

Deo is always a little behind Tommy, especially as Tommy laughs and worms his way across the ground.

Tommy is the first to roll his truck into the other side.

He stands up onto his feet, jumping up and down and looking at Deo.

“Ha!” Tommy yells, “I’m the best at playing truck! You’re the worst, you’re old and the worst at trucks!”

Deo smiles.

There he is. That’s Tommy.

And so Tommy becomes himself.

He learns that people are kind, he flinches less.

Deo could never be more proud, he watches Tommy grow into a little human person. With opinions and jabs and knows every way to insult Luke in about thirty seconds. He watches as he learns that he should not pick up a gun.

(That was very stressful looking back. Lots of screaming, and Wisp laughing a lot.)

And Tommy becomes... well himself, with bright eyes and a wide smile and a certain way he speaks which is a bit too close to Wisp's for Deo's comfort.

It's nice.

Tommy becomes himself, he's brighter, he's happier and everyone sees it.

Tommy decides early on that his favourite thing in the entire world is bacon. Then he decides that it's the worst movie Deo has ever seen in his life, and then he decides he really likes Home Alone, which is a better movie.

So Deo accepts it.

Now they're watching Home Alone for the fifth time this week.

It's Wednesday.

"Get 'em!" Tommy yells.

He's standing on the rug, with both his hands up in the air as he whoops and encourages Kevin and the various amounts of violence he's doing. He cheers whenever one of the robbers, who have names but Deo doesn't remember, gets hurt.

"Take that!" He pumps his fist in the air, jumping up and down and somehow shaking the entire floor despite being literally a tiny bean. He walks up to the TV, holding both sides and shaking it back and forth.

Of course, Tommy is... a rather small person, so he doesn't manage to shake it much, but Wisp yells and stands up and makes sure the TV doesn't fall onto him.

"Get wrecked! Get wrecked! Get wrecked!" Tommy claps his hands together and jumps up and down as Kevin outplays literally everyone else in the movie, it's almost amusing, it would be if he hadn't done this every other time he's watched it.

Luke is on the edge of his seat, clapping when Tommy does and cheering when he does.

Bitzel is just... on his phone.

And Wisp looks very stressed about Tommy shaking the TV.

Deo sighs, leaning back into the couch, he needs to show Tommy an actually calming movie — one that doesn't get him yelling and jumping around before bed. Because Deo's not sure how much longer he can do this whole energy thing.

Why did no one tell him that raising a child was so fucking tiring?

"Okay, buddy," Deo says gently, and Tommy turns around, pouting at him.

"Mister Deo I wanna watch Home Alone—"

"What about we try a new movie?" Deo says, and he doesn't even try to stamp out the hope in his voice, because he is *so* fucking tired of Home Alone, Tommy has grabbed this movie and decided it is going to be the only thing anyone in this house consumes for the rest of time.

Tommy pouts.

Deo tries to go through the movies that he knows off the top of his head, there's a new Barbie movie— they have all the DVDs to The Land Before Time because Deo loves that series, even if Wisp thinks it's the dumbest thing in the world.

“There's a new Barbie movie,” Deo says slowly.

“What's it about?” Tommy asks.

Deo sighs.

He is one of the most feared and wanted people in L'Manberg— someone who has killed people and still he says—

“Well— Blair is a poor girl who works at a coffee shop and she gets the chance to become a princess so she goes to the charm school and then— yeah.”

Tommy's eyes light up.

Why did no one tell him that becoming a parent meant he had to forget any dignity he had? He can hear Wisp snickering in the corner and Bitzel trying to repress his laughter, Luke seems quietly excited about a Barbie movie.

“Okay,” Deo sighs, “Barbie it is.”

And so like that Tommy calms his energy, he sits on the couch next to Deo, and watches the Barbie movie with bated breath, Barbie Princess Charm School, the real way to get a kid to be quiet.

Deo will have to remember this.

And eventually, he starts to doze off, his head will tilt down and every now and again he'll pop back up awake, and watch the movie for a few more seconds before falling asleep again.

Deo laughs a little at it.

Tommy opens his eyes again, sitting back up, before looking at Deo.

He flops so he's laying on Deo, resting against his shoulder and Deo looks at him for a moment. Tommy just looks up at him, the trust that he seems to have for him in his eyes. He gives a small smile for a moment, and his entire face softens.

"I like—" Tommy yawns, "Like the Barbie movie— ver' good." He nods to himself as if confirming the statement. "Delancy tha' evil—"

And Tommy falls back asleep again.

Deo laughs, "Guess we'll never know."

And the rest of them laugh, a gentle fond sort of thing, and Deo assumes in that moment they would all do anything to protect this kid.

Prime, he was wrong about that.

Tommy's seventh birthday is a happy one. It's just them this year, later there will be time for big birthday parties and lots of friends, but today is not that time. Right now it's just the four of them, eating a cheesecake that Bitzel made and the base is too hard.

There's too much gelatin and not enough lemon to call it a lemon cheesecake.

But Tommy is laughing and it looks like he's happy and that is more than enough for Deo. He has his pile of presents next to him, all of them are unwrapped and there are swaths and swaths of wrapping paper on the floor.

"I think," Tommy says, his mouth full of cake. "It should be my birthday every day."

"But then you'd get old," Luke responds, he's always been the best at matching Tommy, with the same energy and the sort of childish demeanour, "Then your back would hurt all the time."

"Deo's back hurts all the time!" Tommy says.

"Now that," Wisp says, putting a hand on Tommy's shoulders, "That my friend, is the cost of being thrown into a crate last night."

Deo glares at Wisp. "No work talk at the table."

Tommy looks at Deo with wide eyes, "Did you have a fight?"

Deo sighs, "Yes, Tommy, there was a shootout."

Another moment of silence, "Did we win?" Tommy looks between all of them, "Did we win at least? Because we can't be losers."

Deo laughs, "Yeah, we won."

Tommy beams. "You should let me come help you!"

“Nope,” Bitzel looks up from his cheesecake which he is attacking with a fork. “You are never coming to a shootout.”

“I’m useful!” Tommy says, looking at Deo desperately, “I can be useful! Ma and Pa said I can be useful, I can help you guys out! I’m strong!”

Deo isn’t sure whether to laugh or cry.

Wisp gives a sad smile, giving Deo a look and then leaning towards Tommy. “Kid, you don’t need to be useful.”

“But I want to be!”

Wisp looks out of his depth and he sighs, “I know kid, but you don’t have to be. You’re only little still, and we don’t want you to get hurt.”

The cheesecake eating ends rather quickly after that, and since it’s already Tommy’s bedtime, Deo is the one who takes him to bed.

He follows Tommy into his room.

It’s a quiet affair, even as Tommy and Deo carry all his presents into his room which rustle because of the sheer amount of them. Deo has most of them but Tommy carries two boxes and does it like he owns the world.

He dumps them all on the ground, looking up at Deo.

Luckily, Tommy is wearing his Peppa Pig pajamas already, so doesn’t have much protest as he clambers into bed underneath the covers.

“I wanna help,” Tommy mumbles quietly, looking at Deo with the broken sort of soft expression that he’s mastered. “Please let me help, I just wanna be helpful.”

“But buddy,” Deo crouches down so he’s a bit shorter than Tommy, “We don’t want you to get hurt. What about your big plans? You’re gonna grow up, and then you’re gonna live a very happy life.”

He taps Tommy on the nose as he says this, which makes Tommy screw up his face.

“No,” he laughs, “Kids like me don’t live that long. Their Ma’s and Pa’s hurt them too badly.”

Okay, Deo is probably going to start crying. “That’s not true,” he says gently, “You’re here now, we’re not going to hurt you.”

“Well *duh* I know that,” Tommy says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, he rolls his eyes with the sass that only a recently turned seven-year-old can manage. “But— mean kids like me don’t live that long— they get hurt.”

“You’re not going to get hurt.”

“I can’t even see myself as seventeen,” Tommy says, “That’s so far away— I’m gonna be old, I’m going to have to move out! I don’t want to move out, I want to be here forever! You’re nice to me, the world is mean to me—”

“No, buddy,” Deo says gently, “The world will be kind to you. I promise you.”

Tommy shakes his head, “Then why hasn’t it been?”

Deo opens his mouth and closes it again, before putting both hands on Tommy’s shoulders, “Buddy,” he says gently, “Sometimes— sometimes mean people hurt nice people. I don’t

know why they do it.”

“You hurt people,” Tommy mumbles, “You’re a nice person.”

Deo isn’t even sure where he can start with that, how he can begin to explaining that *no* he isn’t a nice person at all and that everyone he starts a fight with is also a mean person. It’s the way that fights work here, and Deo hopes Tommy will never have to understand that.

“But you’re a nice person, Tommy,” Deo smiles at him, “You’re funny, and you’re super brave, and you even beat Bitzel at Wii bowling! No one ever beats Bitzel at bowling, you’re just the best. And you’re so sweet, and you didn’t deserve what happened to you.”

“Nothing happened to me?” Tommy tilts his head, “Ma and Pa just— y’know, I was a bad kid sometimes. They didn’t like it when I was bad. I cried a lot, adults don’t like when I cry, I’m very, very loud.”

Deo has half a mind to resurrect Tommy’s parents, so he can make their deaths slow and painful and *so fucking painful it’s not funny* . And he can watch the life drain out of their eyes as they slowly bleed—

Okay, way too dark.

Tommy needs him right now.

“No, Tommy,” he shakes his head, “Your Ma and Pa were mean to you, you did nothing wrong, kids are allowed to cry. They’re allowed to be loud when they cry.” He pauses for a few moments. “Tommy, have you ever tried to be quiet when you cried because you were scared you’d make someone angry?”

Tommy nods.

“Buddy—” Deo says, “Please always tell me when you get sad. Even if you don’t know why I might not be able to fix it but I’ll help you. No matter how dumb you think it is, if you need a hug or some chocolate, I’ll help.”

Tommy looks at him with a quivering lip. His eyes are filled with tears and it looks like he’s using all of his effort to not cry.

“Would you like a hug?”

Tommy nods.

Deo wraps his arms around Tommy, hugging him to his chest. He’s still small, he’s always been a small kid, and Deo picks him up, hugging him with as much force as he can, Tommy hugs him back and buries his face into his shoulder.

“You’re gonna live a very long and happy life,” Deo promises, hugging him tightly, “And when you’re seventeen, and getting ready to go out into the big wide world, and do amazing things, I’ll be there. On your seventeenth birthday, I’ll be there.”

Tommy leans back to look at him.

Then he bursts into tears.

Deo can’t do anything but hold him and promise it’ll be alright.

Because it will.

It will be alright, just not now.

He remembers later that Tommy was curious. He pulls on Wisp's sleeve and tries to get the information out of him, he asks a million questions.

The one that sticks with Deo happens when Tommy is about nine.

"Are you like me?" Tommy asks one night at dinner, looking at Wisp.

"Huh?" Wisp sounds strangled.

"My powers," Tommy says in the bragging voice only a child can manage. "Deo says my powers are very strong and I gotta be careful or I might hurt someone."

Wisp just stares at him, mouth slightly open.

"I—" Wisp looks at Luke for help and Luke only provides a shrug. "Your Ma and Pa weren't very nice to you, were they?"

Tommy shakes his head.

Wisp manages a slightly bigger smile, "Then yeah, I'm like you."

Deo thinks that Tommy might be the only living person alive who knows Wisp's powers. He remembers that Wisp and Tommy spent that entire night talking in hushed voices on the couch.

He thinks Wisp might have cried a little.

He knows Tommy comforted him though.

And Deo remembers how the pride swells in his chest. The way he smiles at the closed door that leads into the living room. And he remembers knowing that Tommy would do amazing things.

Wisp and Tommy appear to be alike. Wisp is more violent, he has a cruel edge to him and Tommy just has a childlike innocence around him.

They're alike.

When Tommy is eight he has a gun pushed against his temple.

Deo remembers what it's like to be scared again.

He stares at Deo with wide, confused eyes and Deo finds that breathing has become a lot harder because it's Tommy—

It was a weapons deal gone wrong and Tommy wasn't in his room but he was supposed to be and instead he was in the hallway and the weapons dealer ran into the hallway, where Tommy was standing and he got grabbed, and now there's a gun against his forehead.

Tommy stares at Deo, and there's trust in his eyes. There's far too much trust, Tommy trusts that Deo will get him out of this.

He isn't so sure.

"Let the kid go—" Deo says, keeping his voice forcibly level, he pretends that his hands aren't shaking and Wisp isn't standing behind his shoulder, gun pointed straight at the weapons dealer. "He has no business with you, your business is with us— and us alone."

"If I blow his brains out," the weapons dealer smiles, "I'd say that makes it his business, at least a little."

Tommy to his credit doesn't move or say anything. He just stands there, arm wrapped slightly too close to his throat and he looks at Deo.

His eyes are so trusting—

Deo hates it, no smart child should trust him that much.

"You have a kid," Wisp says, "A little girl, her name is Isabella, right?"

Okay, what they're not going to do is threaten the child of the man with a gun. One who is currently threatening to shoot their kid.

"How old is she?" Deo asks gently, shooting Wisp a look. "She's about the same age as Toms, I reckon, maybe she's in his class."

The chances of that were almost impossible, Tommy was going to a Logstedchire primary school and the weapons dealer was from Middle L'Manberg.

"Toms, do you know an Isabella in your class?"

Please lie, please lie, please fucking lie—

And Tommy must have been able to see something in his eyes, or Wisp's, or he was just a smart kid in general.

"Yeah," Tommy says slowly, "Her mum does her hair, it looks very pretty."

Thank fuck.

"Please let him go," Deo says gently. "Nothing will happen to you, or anyone. We can let this go."

"Sorry chief." The arms dealer grinned. "No loose ends, you know how this job goes—"

And Deo has no idea the details of what went down at that moment.

All he does know for certain is that there was a gunshot, not Wisp's gun. Deo screamed and lept forwards.

The arms dealer fell dead on the ground.

Deo caught Tommy in his arms, looking at him with wide frantic eyes. "Are you— are you hurt, what hurts, we can get it fixed, you're okay—"

Tommy looks at him with equally wide eyes. "Am I hurt?"

"I don't know, I don't know," he looks at the side of Tommy's head. He expects to see a gash or something. Blood, some mess of skull that they can get fixed—

There's nothing.

Not even a scratch, there's a dent from where the gun was pressed against his temple.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

What.

Tommy stares at Deo, his eyes are filled with tears. "Am I gonna die? I don't wanna die— my teacher says you can't die until you're old. I'm not old!"

And Deo looks for an injury, on Tommy's chest or leg or neck. He looks for an injury and instead he finds nothing.

Not a bullet or a scratch or anything.

Then he glances at whatever the fuck Wisp is doing. He's leaning over... a body, the person who held a gun to Tommy's head and shot.

He's dead. Bullethole in the chest.

Blood pools and Deo puts a hand over Tommy's eyes.

"Am I gonna die? Are you closing my eyes like they do in TV shows? Am I dead?"

"No, sunshine," Deo says gently, "You're okay."

"Why are you covering my eyes?" Tommy yells, "They only do that to dead people!"

Deo looks at Wisp, his expression screams help in every form he has. Wisp gives him one of the expressions that scream *'I don't fucking know!'*

"Uh—" Wisp says. "Deo's doing a super secret check-up on you, it's an old method that gang members do. To make sure you're okay."

"Right, that—" Deo says.

Blood starts spilling toward them and Deo manages to pick Tommy up so his shoes don't get blood on them at least.

He manages to keep a hand over Tommy's eyes and Deo turns to look at the body.

Bullet hole in the chest. It... doesn't make any fucking sense. How does that happen to someone?

"Tommy, sunshine," Deo says carefully, looking at the body in the hallway. He hopes the blood doesn't spread into the rooms too far. It keeps spreading and Deo forgot how much a person bleeds. "You know the one rule about our house?"

"Yeah!" Tommy says brightly, "Don't go into the office— or the basement— or your bedroom— or that weird room under the stairs— and don't touch the weapons until Wisp teaches me how to use one."

Deo shoots Wisp a look.

“Alright, we’re gonna break some of these,” he shifts his grip on Tommy so his head is buried in the side of his neck. “And I’m gonna need you to stay in my bedroom, okay? I’m gonna grab your... something to entertain yourself with, and you can’t come out until one of the adults get you, got it?”

“Yep!”

Thank Prime that Tommy didn’t really ask questions, he just kind of accepted the weird things— to be fair he didn’t have much of a childhood to compare it to, so he probably didn’t know that childhood could be anything but this.

Deo wasn’t going to be the one to explain that.

He puts Tommy in his bedroom, placing him on the bed, trying to make sure that he doesn’t open his eyes at any point.

Tommy looks up at Deo, “Can I have a book?”

“Sure...” Deo looks at his bookshelf. He grabs the first one on the shelf, before handing it to Tommy.

Tommy’s eyes light up.

Explosions and Bombs: A Guide For Idiots

Deo debates it for a few seconds, whether or not he should give Tommy the book or not. Then he realises a bit of light terrorism has never hurt anyone, and he grabs the second book in the series, throwing it on the bed.

Tommy looks even happier with himself and nods happily.

Deo rushes out of the room, before ending in the hallway with... so much blood on the floor — he's going to have to call the cleaners and that's always fun because then they make fun of how many kills keep happening here.

Wisp is leaning over the dead guy, holding the gun.

"Tommy did this," Wisp eventually says.

"Huh?"

"His— powers," Wisp eventually manages, "You said he has powerful powers, I'm guessing they defend him in dangerous situations. Ones that could harm him."

"I don't fuckin' know," Deo mutters, kicking the dead guy in the leg. He doesn't wanna dispose of this body, that's always the fucking worst. "I was supposed to be training— I didn't know everyone we sold to before Dad died, just knew one of 'em had a kid born with fucking wild powers."

Wisp frowns, "I think Tommy moved his hand, the angle makes sense, it's originated at like — the right height and it tilts up into his heart, I think."

Deo stares at the dead man on the floor.

Tommy did this.

Tommy—

"You're never going to tell him that," Deo says. "While Tommy is in this house he won't see death. I won't let him see a dead body, or hurt anyone on purpose. Alright?"

Wisp stares at the body.

“That’s how my dad died,” Wisp whispers, his hands are shaking, the facade he’s put on for the entire time Deo’s known him is crumbling. “I— he had a knife and— and I—” Wisp’s breathing gets lighter and more laboured. His entire chest heaves with it and he keeps hyperventilating. “Killed him, I didn’t— I never meant to kill him I was just—”

Deo grabs Wisp by the shoulders, making him look away from the body on the ground. “Wisp,” he keeps his voice even, “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“And Pandora’s and Ender and—”

Deo tightens his grip on Wisp’s shoulders, “Wisp— listen to me, you’re not there. Everyone here is safe, everyone is okay, I will handle this. Okay? I will handle this— you need to go keep Tommy company, he’s reading about bombs right now.”

Wisp nods weakly, “I know about those.”

“You do,” Deo adds, “Let me handle this, Tommy’s okay, you’re okay— everyone’s okay.”

Apart from the dead guy.

He isn’t doing amazing.

Wisp walks towards Deo’s room with shaky legs, the bottoms of his shoes still have blood on them and Deo doesn’t have the heart to say anything, instead watches as Wisp softly opens the door and is met with the joyous yelling of Tommy.

Deo turns back towards the body.

Bullethole in the chest and Wisp is right, but the angle is odd. It clearly hit something important but the gun was being held closer to stomach level than gut. Like his hand was twisted upwards at the last moment.

It's not impossible.

Tommy's file, the scrappy thing Deo skimmed over before they dragged Tommy out of the rubble that used to be his house, said something about telekinesis. This would be telekinesis, but something doesn't sit right about it.

It feels... off...

Too much power for just light telekinesis.

Normally people can't move specific limbs with that much precision.

Deo ignores the pit in his stomach.

Tommy's powerful, that much is known by anyone who looks at him for more than three seconds. But having the level of power, the accuracy needed—

That's not normal.

Not this young, at least, with no training.

Powerful people in L'Manberg get used... being a hero, fighting in gang wars, powerful people in L'Manberg, the ones that can hurt and do real damage— they're used as a loaded pistol ready to fire.

“It’s fine,” Deo mutters, mostly to himself. “Everything’s—”

He looks at the body again.

“Fine...” he finishes.

Because Deo says that Tommy should have at least a pretend normal childhood he goes to a school, a normal child school where Tommy gets normal childhood experiences. It’s a small public school in Logstedchire, it’s where Luke went apparently.

Deo went to the big school down the road, the one that he went to, it didn’t matter what house he ended up in, the one constant was his school, one of the few places he met up with his father, even if that was slightly illegal, one of the places he was confirmed a warm meal, and also to get the shit beat out of him. He was the poor foster kid the one with a criminal father and a dead mother, which made him an easy target.

So in no world was Tommy going to the main primary school, instead, he went to the other one, which Business Bay funded with whatever money they could. It was a good school and the teachers cared.

This may be part of the reason Deo was called in for a parent-teacher interview at Tommy’s school. Tommy was a pretty skittish kid at best, and it made sense why they’d want to question Deo.

Deo would question himself if he was a teacher.

Which was why at five o’clock on a Friday, instead of playing some mind game in a dodgy bar, he was sitting in a school hallway next to his— son? Brother? It was a bit murky, the relationship, it felt at least a bit paternal—

Anyway, he's sitting next to Tommy, as the family across from him gives him the biggest stink-eye in the fucking world. And like— he gets it, Deo is only like... twenty-three, *holy Prime he's old*. And he looks like a young person.

He has a couple of tattoos, he has a couple of concerningly big scars around his neck. Deo probably should have worn a better outfit, because the bomber jacket and the white shirt that might have blood on it was not the correct choice—

He doesn't think it has blood on it.

... he hopes it doesn't have blood on it.

He leans against the chair, looking at Tommy who seems unimpressed, his leg is bouncing at a rapid speed and he looks like he's about to explode from the general stress that seems to come with being Tommy.

It's almost funny.

"Am I in trouble?" Tommy asks.

Oh great now the parents are going to judge the shit outta him.

"No, buddy," Deo says, ignoring the eyes on him.

He's the leader of one of the most notorious and dangerous gangs in L'Manberg and right now his biggest fear is the judging eyes of parents around him. Was anyone gonna tell him how shitty parents are to each other? Or was he just supposed to find that out himself?

"Normally when people sit in the hallway they're in trouble."

“Tommy— you know what a parent-teacher night is.”

“Yeah but it’s funny to watch you panic,” Tommy replies with a grin.

Now, if Deo wasn’t in public he would cus out this little shit of a child, instead, he’s forced to sit there and glare at Tommy, and Tommy grins back. Tommy is lucky he’s— well Tommy, because if he wasn’t Deo would probably be yelling.

But it’s Tommy, and Tommy is a funny kid so it’s okay.

“Can we get McDonald’s after?”

“We have food at home.”

Tommy frowns, “But I want a McFlurry.”

“I’m not getting you a McFlurry,” Deo sighs, “We have ice cream at home, and whenever you ask for just a McFlurry, somehow you end up getting an entire meal.”

Tommy pouts, sinking down in his chair. “You never let me get a McFlurry.”

“Literally every other time I do—”

“Thomas?” Someone says and Deo is so fucking relieved— he doesn’t have to deal with the judgy parents, judging him for not getting a McFlurry for Tommy, then judging that he did get one every other time—

Parents. The real issue.

Deo stands up, and Tommy does too, although he seems way more excited.

Why is this being done like a doctor's appointment—

It wasn't done like this when Deo was at school.

Wait he never went to these—

He follows after Tommy to the teacher's desk, and Tommy sits down on the side with two chairs. Swinging his leg excitedly as he kinda bounced up and down, clearly chuffed with whatever he was thinking.

Chuffed who the fuck says chuffed apart from fucking British people?

"Hi," Deo says, "I'm— Tommy's guardian. Lovely to meet you."

"You too," his teacher, who's name Deo has forgotten smiles at him. "Now, Tommy's not in any trouble, but I assume you knew that."

"I mean I wouldn't be overly shocked," Deo smiles fondly, "He's a bit of a trouble maker."

"I only set the couch on fire once!" Tommy throws his arms up in the air and sinks back in his chair the only way a kid can, with the right amount of exasperation and general tiredness.

"Twice."

“That’s less than Luke.”

“Luke does it as a semi-daily occurrence, do not compare yourself to Luke—”

Tommy frowns, but he’s hiding his smile very badly, if Deo is being honest, his teacher must see that because she laughs.

“Tommy is a very bright kid,” she says, “Very opinionated too.”

Tommy leans over to Deo, “That’s teacher talk for I’m rude.” He whispers, although Tommy is yet to get the hang of this whole whispering thing, at the moment it’s not his strongest point. “But my friends are dumb, and they gotta know.”

Deo does his best to put on his adult-responsibility face, so he nods seriously. “Oh?”

Tommy nods enthusiastically, “One of them didn’t know Mongolia was above China! I just told them it was and then they started crying.”

Deo looks at the teacher.

Who gives an awkward smile and nods.

“Tommy, people are still learning. How would you feel if you couldn’t do algebra right—”

“What’s algebra?”

“Letters in math,” Deo replies, “They put letters in maths.”

“Why?”

“That’s— a very long story,” Deo mutters, “Uh— so if you couldn’t do this math, and then I was mean to you about it, you wouldn’t be over the moon about it, would you?”

“Well no, it’s not my fault I can’t do it, nobodies ever taught me nothin’.”

Deo sighs, “So maybe— please don’t be mean to your friends about things they haven’t been taught yet.”

Tommy frowns, “Fine.”

The teacher, and Deo *still* can’t remember her name, laughs softly, “Tommy is an incredibly intelligent kid, he’s mature beyond his years.”

Now. Deo got called that in primary school.

And now he is severely traumatised, so maybe that’s not the right thing to be. He glances down at Tommy who is beaming.

Right. Okay?

“How so?”

“His conflict de-esclation is the best I’ve seen from a kid his age in— perhaps ever,” she smiles and she doesn’t understand the complete dread that fills Deo’s body, as he glances at Tommy who is firmly looking at the ground. “And that’s a good skill for someone to have.”

Not at eight-years-old.

He glances back at Tommy.

Tommy seems quiet too.

Deo can't remember the rest, he knows he spoke but he can't remember what about, or if it was even important. He knows he zoned out half the time, he knows that he barely remembers what was said, vaguely he's aware that it was good.

Eventually the pair of them leave the room, and Tommy follows Deo to the car, he's perfectly silent, not saying a single word and somehow that throws him off even more.

They get into the car, and Deo sits there for a moment, trying to think of anything to say.

"Are you mad at me?" Tommy asks, and Deo looks up at him, clearly confused. "You— seem upset and—" he laughs awkwardly, "I'm pretty easy to get angry at."

"You're not," Deo says, "I'm not mad at you."

"Okay," Tommy leans back in the seat, glancing at Deo and opening his mouth. He shakes his head and closes his mouth again.

"Are we gonna talk about it?" Deo asks.

Tommy shakes his head.

"Should we?"

“It’s not a big deal,” Tommy mutters, “My parents got angry at each other a lot and I’d try to calm them down.”

“Tommy you were six.”

“They got worse as I got older,” Tommy mumbles, “I got loud and annoying and they got angry at me and each other and—” he pauses to shrug slightly. “They were nice when I was little, we were normal, went to fairs and— I think I went to playschool, it was fine.”

“And somewhere between it being normal and you deciding to—”

“I didn’t mean to do that!” Tommy yells, he hits his hands against the dashboard, an action he’s picked up from Luke, “I never— I didn’t know— I still don’t know what happened, I was scared and they were going to—” he shudders, “Hurt me.”

They both know what Tommy’s talking about.

And maybe if Deo was a better parent he’d try push the subject, get Tommy to say the actual words, but Deo doesn’t want to hear the words and Tommy doesn’t want to say it, so instead Tommy skirts around the topic, the way he always does.

“That’s not my fault!”

“I know,” Deo says evenly, “I’m just— trying to get it. Tommy you were— you are a kid, you were even younger when you were deescalating what seems like violent and abusive fights between your parents.”

Tommy shrugs.

“Tommy—” Deo pinches the bridge of his nose, “Tommy that’s not *normal*. ”

“Well I know that,” Tommy mutters, “But— they’d hurt me less,” he mumbles, he crosses his arms, folding in on himself. “If they were less angry I’d get hurt less— sometimes not at all!” He grins at that, “Then we’d do normal family things and that was nice.”

Deo might burst into tears.

“Tommy—” Deo says, his voice is filled with desperation and a sort of rage and grief alongside all of that and Deo—

Well, Deo starts crying.

Tommy looks a bit surprised at that, and Deo can guess why.

To Tommy, Deo is something above all of *this* , whatever this might be. He’s above the emotions and he’s always calm and he’s focused and he doesn’t let Tommy’s story, no matter how sad, get to him.

“Deo?” Tommy says.

Deo just looks at him, trying to stop his tears from flowing.

“Deo? Why are you crying?”

“Because it’s sad,” Deo says, “I’m— fucking hell, Tommy what happened to you is sad, and it makes me upset.”

“I’m sorry?”

Deo wipes his eyes to little success, “No— no, don’t— don’t apologise, just—” he wipes at his eyes more, to little avail, “I’m sad for you, sad because you shouldn’t have had to go through that and— you might not understand now but when you’re older, I hope you look back and realise what they did wasn’t okay.”

“I know that,” Tommy says evenly, leaning his head against the dashboard, before turning so he’s looking at Deo. “It was mean, but— we were normal sometimes, and that was good! I liked that, Ma would brush my hair and Pa would play video games with me!”

Deo looks at Tommy for a moment longer, the hopefulness on his face and the genuine joy knowing his parents did below the bare minimum. But it was above the bar he was used to, and Deo feels— unwell.

“I’m so sorry,” Deo says.

Tommy just looks at him curiously.

“For what you went through, and how Business Bay was involved and—” he cuts himself off, trying to stop himself from sobbing. “I’m so sorry.”

“You weren’t in charge,” Tommy mutters, “You can’t say sorry for your Pa’s decisions.”

Deo just looks at him. “You’re too forgiving.”

“I can be— not forgiving?” Tommy says slowly, “If that will make you feel better?”

Deo laughs, shaking his head. “You’re a fuckin’ idiot.”

“I’m your favourite idiot!” Tommy says brightly.

And it's true.

Deo has a kid. Well— okay that's not quite accurate, but he has a child in his care and he cares about this kid quite a bit.

Tommy was six when members of Business Bay would put him up for a couple of nights.

Now Tommy's eleven and with Deo.

He's grown so fucking much.

It's gross.

He's a funny kid, he's a scared kid, but Tommy is just generally sweet and he really likes to pick flowers and explain why flowers are cool.

"I don't wanna go to soccer."

"You're going to soccer."

"They're mean to me—"

And that makes Deo pause, looking up from the paperwork at his desk. Tommy hasn't even bothered changing into his soccer uniform and Deo raises an eyebrow at that.

"How?"

"I dunno— they just say shit," he sits down on the armchair in the corner of the room.

"Sunflower—"

"That's such a dumb fucking name."

"And you hate it, which makes it so much funnier than if you didn't care at all."

"You are a terrible human."

"Tommy I'm the leader of a gang."

"Yeah? And when I grow up I'm gonna be the leader of a gang—"

"You are not."

Tommy gives a wide smile. "Nah, I am. I have the name planned out and everything. I got the connections."

"Tommy I am begging you please do not be like me."

Tommy just looks confused, "Why? You're nice."

Gang wars have proven differently, and Deo just gives Tommy a sad look. "You have to kill people."

He seems to consider this, just for a moment or two. Before shrugging. "I mean it wasn't that bad."

"You... still have nightmares about it?"

"Oh, yeah."

Deo just runs a hand through his hair and looks at Tommy. "If you don't go to soccer I can't do my work."

"Did Wisp put someone else in the basement to beat up—"

Deo pauses. "Did he?"

Tommy pulls a face, "No... and if he did I would know nothing about it..."

"For Prime's sake—" Deo stands up and Tommy does too, following after him the way he always does. He's a bit like a baby duck, he just follows Deo around everywhere and it's so incredibly endearing it's wild.

Tommy grins, "Wisp said he'd teach me how to—"

"If you end that sentence with torture someone I will personally go find Wisp and hunt him down—"

"It's a useful skill."

Deo just pauses, stopping to look at Tommy and Tommy shoots him a wide grin. Deo takes a deep breath before clapping his hands together and sighing, he runs a hand down his face.

Opens his mouth and closes it again.

Tommy shuffles on his feet.

“There is no circumstance in which you will need to torture someone, alright?”

Tommy looks upset with that, he pouts slightly and

Deo sighs, “Okay, I’ll let you in on a little secret, you can’t tell anyone I told you this.”

Tommy looks up at him with wide eyes, he looks up at Deo like he holds all the secrets of the world, and that’s terrifying, it’s terrifying to know how much Tommy trusts him some days. It makes his skin crawl.

“If you wanna mess with someone,” Deo keeps his voice even, “You want to get into their head, that way you don’t have to do the work.”

“Huh?”

“You— I should not be telling you this,” Deo sighs again, sometimes parenting is telling your children how to manipulate people, apparently. “You find out what they’re scared of— whether that’s losing someone close to them, or dogs or bugs. Then you don’t use that against them, but you make them *think* you’ll use that against them.”

Tommy tilts his head in curiosity, “How do you know?”

“Well—” Deo says slowly, “Lots of ways, you can ask them if you’re close enough. A safe bet is always someone has one person they care about more than anyone else, anything else— a person they’d risk everything and then come to save.”

“Like a best friend?”

“Yeah!” Deo nods, “Or a family member, or a partner, it changes from person to person. And if you can get someone who cares *a lot* about a lot of people, you’re in the clear.”

Tommy pauses, looking down at the ground then back up at Deo. “Should I stop caring about people? If they might use it against me.”

Deo looks at Tommy, Tommy with wide eyes and curly blond hair and is probably a bit too comfortable with holding a gun for his age. Tommy who laughs too hard at jokes and still loves the movie Home Alone and Barbie Princess Charmschool, Tommy who loves with everything he has and then a little bit more.

“No,” Deo shakes his head, “Never stop caring, that’s what makes us human. That’s why we get up, because we care— maybe about ourselves, but humans care for each other, it’s just what we do, I guess.”

“Do you have people you care about?” Tommy asks.

Deo gestures around him, at the house, “Everyone I care about lives within these walls, Wisp, Bitzel, Luke— and you, I couldn’t stop caring about them— and you, if I tried. I don’t want to, I like to think it makes me stronger.”

“But... what if someone uses it against you?”

“What if they don’t?” Deo challenges, “And I spend my life alone?”

Tommy goes quiet at this, nodding his head. “You’re smart.”

Deo snorts at that, shaking his head and starting to walk towards the basement again, to see if Wisp is beating the shit out of someone in the basement. Probably. But Deo, for once, wants

to have hope in his friend.

He heads down the hallway, and Tommy clears his throat.

This makes Deo stop, before turning around and looking at Tommy.

“Deo?”

“Yeah.”

“Caring about people is scary— especially if people want to use it against you.”

“It is.”

“I want to care though,” Tommy mumbles, and Deo is barely able to make it out. “I like— caring, I like being here, and I like caring about people and— I don’t want to lose that.”

Deo smiles, “You won’t, Tommy, you care. Whether you like it or not, you care about people and that’s one of the many reasons you’re one of the most incredible people I have ever, or will ever, meet.”

Tommy’s entire face gets brighter as a grin creeps across his face, and Deo can’t help but give him a twin smile back.

Deo glares, hitting them across the face with the bar again and they cry out in pain. “Tell us what the fuck you did with our messenger—”

His phone buzzes and Deo frowns, he wipes the bar on his jeans before walking over to his phone and picking it up. He tucks it between his shoulder and the side of his head, tilting his head to do so.

“Yeah?” Deo says, “I’m working right now—”

“What are the causes of World War One?” Tommy asks.

“Tommy, I’m working,” Deo mutters, he holds up a hand as if an apology to the other gang leader currently bleeding out from several cuts on his face. “Where the fuck is Luke?”

“He doesn’t know,” Tommy says.

“Google it,” Deo sighs, “Tommy, I am right in the middle of something kid—” he holds the phone away from his face, “Stop whimpering I swear— just give me like five minutes.” He brings the phone back to his ear. “Tommy... buddy—”

“Please?” Tommy asks.

Deo sighs, “Basically everyone got really into nationalism, which is pride for your country— lots of countries had a lot of colonies and they really wanted to show off their power. Basically, men wanting to show they had power.”

“Okay... okay—”

“And there were advanced technologies, they were inventing like way more guns and weapons that could cause problems. Then tensions rose because of that and a bunch of people were making treaties because of this technology, then someone assassinated the next in line to like inherit the Austro-Hungarian Empire.”

Deo looks over his shoulder.

“Stop fuckin’ whimpering! Unless you have anything to add.”

Tommy hums on the other side of the home. *“Okay, thank you!”*

Deo sighs, “That all kid?”

“Maybe!”

Then Tommy hangs up, and Deo is left sighing. Well, now where was he?

Oh yeah—

Deo grabs the bar again before hitting the gang leader across the face again, it echoes around the walls and Deo puts one leg up on the chair where they aren’t sitting. He presses the pipe against their throat.

“Now,” Deo says calmly, “You are going to tell us what the fuck you did with our runner, or I’m going to make sure that even the worms don’t find you. Got it? Now where the fuck are they—”

“Dead!” He yells, “Your runner is fucking dead— died in a shoot-out. Wasn’t cruel, wasn’t drawn out.”

Well, Deo can’t be having that.

He kicks the chair, and the chair and the other gang leader hit the floor with a loud thump. The chair doesn’t break and the ties on him don’t loosen. He struggles on the floor a little, and Deo crouches down.

They're looking eye-to-eye.

"Have you ever played Russian roulette?" Deo asks, he looks at his own gun and grins. "I have six barrels not five, but I think it'll make do."

His phone rings again.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Deo speaks to the roof, "Don't start crying again or I will blow your brains out—" he picks up his phone again, "Hi Tommy! I'm still working."

He can almost feel the scowl from the other side of the phone.

"Luke caught the curtain on fire," Tommy says slowly, "He was going a visual metaphor of Europe pre-World War One and now our curtain is on fire."

"Have you... put it out?" Deo asks, "Tommy— please tell me the fire is out."

Tommy pauses, and static comes through the phone.

"It is currently on the floor."

"Is it burning... on the floor?"

"Yup."

"Tommy we have a fire blanket."

“I know, Luke’s trying to find it.”

“Second cupboard underneath the TV, it should be underneath all the video games— unless Wisp moved it because he loves causing issues and then it’s underneath the couch in the formal living room.”

There’s the general sound of chaos over the phone, sounds like Bitzel is there too. Tommy is just laughing lightly and generally being unhelpful.

Another few moments of chaos.

“Okay,” Tommy says, “It’s out. It was under the video games, Luke did get distracted and go to load up the new one you guys got but Bitzel hit him in the side of the head with a spoon.”

“Right,” Deo sighs, “Now. You have two adults there, and a computer— I am in the middle of something.”

He prods the guy on the floor with his foot.

Yeah, he’s fine.

That is more blood than he remembers.

Guy isn’t whimpering though.

Deo leans down feeling for a pulse.

Still there.

“But Deo—” Tommy complains, *“I like talking to you.”*

Deo sighs.

“Tommy,” he says with a sigh. “I am currently beating a guy up for information, please stop calling— I’ll be done in like twenty minutes.”

Tommy huffs. *“But Deoooooooo—”*

“But nothing,” Deo says, “You’re in charge. Okay, bye love you.”

And he hangs up.

The gang leader on the floor is laughing. “The o’so intimidating leader of Business Bay, saying I love you to a child on the phone— that’s—” they wheeze, and Deo knows it hurts because he’s broken two ribs on that man.

Deo just gives him a look, before kicking him in the stomach.

He crouches down again. “Maybe we’ll do Russian roulette. Odds stacked against you.”

And he loads the gun.

“Tommy,” Deo pushes one of the books to the side of the table. “I mean this so kindly, what the fuck is this?”

“Homework,” Tommy says, his mouth full of the chips he’s chewing on. He grabs another handful and stuffs them into his face. “I’m doin’ homework like a normal human child.”

“That implies you are not a normal human child,” Deo sighs. He stacks some of the books up on each other, trying to save a little bit of space because Deo also has shit to do, and his desk is not big enough. “You are both human and a child.”

“I’m normal,” Tommy says, mouth full of chips.

Deo is rapidly aging.

“What part of you is normal?” Deo deadpans.

Tommy shrugs, before looking down at his hands, then he grabs a piece of hair and flattens it over his forehead. “I mean my hair is pretty normal.”

“Oh?”

Tommy just glares, “Deo, why are you making me do classes that are like— three years older than I am.”

“The government is making you do classes for people three years older than you are,” Deo mutters absent-mindedly, putting his own papers on the desk. “Because you are legally fifteen, remember?”

“I’m twelve.”

“Legally you are fifteen.”

“Couldn’t you have found me a better birth certificate?” Tommy asks, “Like come on man ___”

Deo sighs, looking up from his papers and giving his most blank, deadpan expression he’s even attempted to give. “Tommy I had fifteen minutes to find something.”

Tommy considers this only for a few seconds, “But— *Deooooo* .”

“Tommy.”

“How hard is it to find a birth certificate?”

“Rather,” Deo deadpans, “I’m not an expert in forgery kid.”

With an eyeroll, Tommy slumps down in his chair, glaring slightly at his papers. “Can you help me?”

“Nope.”

“But it’s taxation.”

“I don’t pay taxes,” Deo isn’t even lying about that. “No taxable income, it’s great— but don’t become a criminal.”

“Nah, I think I will,” Tommy says brightly, “When I get older I’m gonna start a gang.”

“Prime help us all.”

“I’m gonna call it— The Crown Jewels.”

“Isn’t that slang for—”

“Yes, yes it is.”

Deo sighs, running a hand down his face, “Logstedchire is not ready for you.”

“Nope!” Tommy says brightly, he looks down at his paper again. “Y’know— my teacher said I could be an engineer, which is funny because I’m really bad at statistics. She thinks I have the potential to be *something great*. ”

He says the last bit in the most Tommy-like way possible, with an eyeroll and a little tilt of his head.

Deo just laughs.

“Well if you wanna be an engineer then you can be an engineer.”

“Nah,” Tommy says, “I’d be miserable as an engineer— all the maths y’know, I’m good at maths but I don’t really like it. I think I’d like to work in film.”

“Film?”

“Yeah!” Tommy nods, “Film, I want to create— y’know, maybe a journalist that would be fun. I can write opinion pieces, you know I have a lot of opinions.”

Deo grins, “And loud opinions, even better. I mean there’s an agency still starting up in Kinoko, CNL, I think, they probably want interns and all of that other shit. I mean, I could probably find you a way in, or if you want to get in ethically I can help find applications and stuff.”

Tommy hums. “Maybe,” he says slowly. “I’ll think about it.”

Deo nods, leaning back in his chair.

“Tommy?”

Tommy glances back up from his homework, looking Deo in the eyes, with that sort of trust that he’s always had with him.

“Whatever you do, you’ll be great at it.”

“Huh?”

“Whatever you do, if you’re an engineer or a street artist or a chef— you’ll be amazing at it. You carry this passion with everything you do— this spark, this light— and that’s rare, and everyone loves that. So…” he pauses for a few moments, “You’re a great person, and you’re bright and whatever you do I’ll be proud.”

Tommy looks at him for a long moment, “I know.” He says.

“Huh?”

“I know,” Tommy continues, “You’ve always been proud of me,” Tommy grins down at his paper again. “Believe it or not, I know you care, you always have.”

“Oh,” Deo mutters.

Tommy laughs, throwing a pencil at his head. “You’re dumb. I know you care.”

And Deo doesn’t know this, but Tommy will believe that forever, even when things go wrong and they go badly and Business Bay inevitably ends in tragedy. Still, Tommy will know Deo cared, all this time.

But nice things don’t always last, and in a theme that seems pretty fitting for the life of Tommy, this isn’t any exception to the rule that has defined his life. Nice things don’t last, cruel things last for too long.

And in the end Tommy loses everyone.

End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! I'll try get back to comments on this one but I might just be overwhelmed because of all the other stuff being uploaded at the same time, sending you all love!

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